

# Vegan

The word vegan is said to have been invented in Leicester in 1944 by Donald Watson and Dorothy Morgan. Before that the ethical philosophies which became part of veganism were loosely associated with vegetarianism. The immediate and most striking difference between the two is that the vegetarian thing is only a diet. By comparison the vegan idea was, and is, to cease exploiting animals entirely. This compassionate ethic therefore affects every part of a person's life: Food, clothing, cosmetics, cleaning products, transportation, everything.

The objection most often made is to question whether eating animals is "natural". The word "natural" tends to carry with it the implicit assumption that all "natural" things must be "good" and that all unnatural things must be "bad".

It is very easy to shoot down in flames the imaginary idea of "natural" being "good".

Volcanoes are natural, earthquakes are natural, disease causing bacteria are usually natural, poisonous plants and venomous animals are all natural. A murderer could happily hand you a cup of deadly nightshade extract while telling you, quite truthfully, that all of the ingredients are "natural".

But, to return to the question, what diet would be natural for a human being?

We are apes. Biologically we are apes. Our digestive system is not tremendously different to the digestive systems of gorillas, chimpanzees, bonobos and orangutans. We should therefore consider the possibility that our most natural diet and lifestyle might be similar to that of the great apes.

On the other hand we might not want to spend our time sitting naked in a tree and eating fruit. Even if "the hippies were right" we still might not want to do it.

Apes tend to be eaters of fruit and other plant sources but they've never been fussy about it. They will happily pick and eat parasites such as fleas or ticks from each others' bodies. They don't fuss if the leaves they eat from the tree may include the odd insect or caterpillar.

Broadly speaking animals divide into herbivorous, carnivorous and omnivorous. There are variations between those three categories. Dogs, for instance, tend to be on the omnivorous side of carnivorous. That means that they like meat but can also enjoy a biscuit. Apes tend to be on the herbivorous side of omnivorous.

Humans are different. Our advanced brains and individual personalities give us the possibility of creating foods that nature never thought of. We also have the knowledge of good behaviour compared with bad and we often feel compelled to figure out the ethics of our actions.

What does “natural” mean, ultimately? Natural means all the stuff happening in the universe that wasn’t done by humans or any other intelligent creature. So it follows, therefore, that parsecs and parsecs and parsecs of empty space between the galaxies is “natural” while a man deciding to make a sandwich is “unnatural”.

It’s natural if the universe does it (stars, planets, moons, oceans, mountains, camels, dogs, cats, rabbits) but unnatural if we do it (sandwiches, automobiles, aeroplanes, books, television, clothing, poetry, paintings, computers, bicycles).

So therefore the objection “isn’t it more natural to do so and so” is a more or less meaningless thing to say.

Another often made criticism of vegan ethical lifestyle is that vegan food companies make plant based foods which resemble meat or fish or dairy. We are challenged with the accusation that such foods are “hypocritical”.

Now the word “hypocritical” has meaning only in relation to the declared moralistic intention. If we say we don’t want to exploit animals and we are found to be successfully and genuinely avoiding any exploitation of animals then we aren’t hypocrites. If we are genuinely trying our best to avoid any usage of animals then we still aren’t hypocrites.

We never said, collectively, that we didn’t like the look or the taste or the texture or the feel of meat, cheese, leather, fur, wool, honey or hen’s eggs. (Although, non-collectively, individuals are entitled to their own opinions of course). We only said that we didn’t want to harm the animals. A plant-based meal which resembles a carnivorous one isn’t hypocritical because it doesn’t stray from the stated intention of the whole thing. Vegan Doc Martens are cool, acrylic jumpers are okay. Your pullover isn’t made of animals? Good.

I can even turn this “hypocrite” accusation around the other way and say “Hey, meat eaters, if you like meat so much why do you disguise the taste and the smell and the look of your food by mixing the meat with sage and onions and apple sauce and all the other plant based ingredients which you use to make meat protein seem like it’s a herb or a fruit or a vegetable?” When people are attracted to a hot dog stand it’s the fried onions which do most of the attracting.

Then there’s the question of Nazi propaganda. During World War Two the Nazis tried to push the idea of mass murderer Adolf Hitler as a “nice person” by associating him with vegetarianism. Years later the same Nazi propaganda has been employed the opposite way around by people who don’t like vegans and vegetarians. Those people declare that “Hitler was a vegetarian” in an attempt to make veggie-eating people seem like Nazis. It’s rubbish.

Properly sourced historical records show that Hitler’s doctor, Theodor Morell, believed that eating too much meat was the cause of Hitler’s medical problems. The doctor prescribed vegetarianism (along with numerous dangerous drugs) as an attempt to keep Hitler alive as long as possible when his body was wracked with pain and disease. There are also historical records clearly indicating that Hitler didn’t always follow his doctor’s advice and sometimes still ate meat. The story of Hitler being vegetarian is therefore a mythological construction.

Other objections sometimes raised include whether veganism includes a healthy diet. Possible deficiencies suggested include calcium, vitamin B12 or the need for protein. These objections are easily answered. Many plant sourced foods contain sufficient amounts of protein. Think of the gorilla. He is bigger and stronger than a human and he can wipe the floor with a human fighter. His diet is plant based.

Fruit, beans, green leafy vegetables are also a good source of calcium. If the body isn't producing a sufficient amount of B12 on its own a supplement can be obtained from yeast extract or spirulina. Many vegan manufactured foods, soy milk for instance, contain extra amounts of protein, calcium and B vitamins. Omega 3 oil is available from plant sources such as sunflower oil and sunflower margarine.

When we were children we were often told fairy stories such as "the cow is there to give us milk" or "the hen is there to give us eggs" or "the pig is there to give us the flesh of his body".

We were perhaps naive enough to believe in this magical world of kings and queens and fairies and magicians in which animals are only too eager to help the farmer by giving him their children and their lives. Perhaps we believed the doctors who told us the usual lies about it being impossible to get protein and other nutrition except by exploiting the animals. We may have believed the mythology that doctors are the "good" men and women who are there to help us every day of our lives and not just trying to rise in their own career and public esteem.

The mythology of doctors and scientists would wish us to believe that anaesthetics were created as a result of animal experimentation. They were not. The story of anaesthetics goes back further than that. All the way back to tribal shamanism in the stone age. For anaesthetics we have to thank the tribal medicine woman or man grinding together various fruits, nuts, beans etc. which can make you go numb or have an out-of-body experience. Then, thousands of years later, the irresponsible use of nitrous oxide gas as an amusement led to its application to dentistry. This is the true story of anaesthetics.

The mythology would wish us to believe that the principle of inoculation was the result of animal experiments. It wasn't. The principle of inoculation was stumbled upon by Doctor Edward Jenner in 1796 when he noticed that milkmaids seemed immune to the pox which was running rampant in the rest of the population. Investigating the reasons he found that the milkmaids were drinking the milk direct from cows who had the cowpox, a related but milder form of the same illness. The inoculation method was developed from that simple discovery and the key element of such discoveries is in observing the population and noticing who is more affected by an illness and who is less affected. This method is called epidemiology and is a genuine source of knowledge. In the 21st Century it is possible to learn even more about the spread of illness, the vectors of it and the means of prevention.

Epidemiology has broadened and now includes molecular epidemiology which studies the genetic component of disease vulnerability.

Animal experimentation is a danger to human life. If we don't have sufficient compassion to care about the suffering of the animals we surely care about the harm that is done to humans when the experiments give a false sense of security.

Animal experiments trick people into thinking that a drug or a procedure is safe after it has been tested on rats or dogs or flies or rabbits. The truth is that these various species of animal will react differently to drugs and so the real test of whether the drug will harm a human doesn't come until the drug is actually given to a human. Thalidomide was tested on animals and produced terrible birth defects in humans after being pronounced safe because it didn't harm the animals. The definition of "harm" in these cases is open to critical discussion. 92% of drugs tested on animals fail when given to humans. The animals are tortured and eventually killed. Humans seldom if ever see any benefit from these money pits.

Meanwhile the planet gets hotter, the ice caps are melting and the human race are on an accelerating population explosion. Our human world cannot go on the same way. We must create a sustainable human society and we must cause less damage to the ecosystem of Planet Earth.